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KnowBits

- a. Knowledge Work Readiness Assessment

In an effort to begin to articulate (in one place) some of the considerations that must be reviewed in creating a knowledge work effort, I have prepared a knowledge work readiness assessment. The assessment consists of approximately 100 yes-no questions that provide an indication of the risk in embarking upon a knowledge work effort. After answering the approximately 100 yes-no questions a graphical assessment of readiness is displayed. Readers of knowldgWORKS News and other interested parties are welcome to try the assessment. Suggestions, questions, and comments are always appreciated. The assessment can be accessed from <http://www.accsys-corp.com/useassessment.htm>.

- b. The Assessment and Your Input

So far, more than 100 readers have accessed and I assumed tried the assessment. I am planning the next version and I would like to have any suggestions that you might have. For example, are the questions useful? Are the questions focused enough? Is the number of questions too great? Too small? Would you like to be able to weight sections of the assessment? How about weighting individual questions within topics? Is there a need to save the results of an assessment so that they can be viewed later? Any comments you might have would be appreciated. Please send them by email to rkaplan@accsys-corp.com.

- c. SmithWeaverSmith

Among the many places on the web you can learn about and discuss knowledge work, one site that stands out and is worth keeping track of is the site created and managed by Barbara Smith. At <http://www.smithweaversmith.com> you will find some of the most thoughtful and useful discussions about knowledge work and organizational culture. What I enjoy most is the depth of the discussion that goes on there and the expertise represented by many of the discussants. On a regular basis I will be mentioning the goings on at this site because I think there are important contributions being made there. Have a look, and I am sure you will not be disappointed.

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Volume 1 Number 15
Topic: Should IT Do KM?

1. Knowledge Management is not a technology.
2. IT is a technology-based discipline.

Therefore: IT should NOT do KM.

This seems pretty straightforward. In this constrained view of what IT does, if IT's solution for a knowledge management effort is a technology solution, then yes, IT should NOT do KM. This goes back to the definition of what knowledge management is and what it involves, and technology alone will not guarantee a successful knowledge management effort. If anything, such an approach may result in the obfuscation of what a knowledge management effort actually involves.

On the other hand there may be other considerations around whether IT should do KM. Perhaps the first question to ask is, "Can IT do KM?"

You could probably find many places on the Internet that would recommend that IT should NOT be the sponsoring organization of a KM effort. One line of reasoning goes something like this: IT organizations are extremely slow to change - consider the example of the adoption of the personal computer. Had this not been forced on IT organizations by proactive users, the monolithic impenetrable IT organization would still exist. Therefore, when thinking of something as open as knowledge management that requires organizations to adopt new ways of behaving, the IT organization would probably be one of the last to adopt any knowledge management principles.

Well maybe. It is important to consider both the culture of the IT organization and the culture of the organization in which the IT organization exists. Let's consider the IT organization first, and then the parent or surrounding organization.

The considerations of whether an IT organization could lead a KM effort center on the nature of the IT organization. I would consider some of the following questions as key to determining the suitability of the IT organization for this task.

1. Is the culture of the IT organization open or closed?
2. Does the IT organization focus most of its efforts on day to day tasks (for example, fire fighting), or is there a strategic aspect to the IT organization's efforts?
3. What do the people of the IT organization think about knowledge management? Is it just another "flavor of the day" to them?
4. Would it be possible to launch a knowledge work effort within the bounds of the IT organization?
5. How does the IT organization think they are perceived by the surrounding organization? Do they call themselves integral? An external service organization? A necessary evil?
6. Is the IT organization flexible? Does it embrace new ideas easily?
7. Is the IT organization good at selling new ideas to its client communities. If it tries to sell something like knowledge management to a client, how will that be perceived by the client?

As you can see the majority of these questions have to do with the culture of the organization as determined by the behaviors that it exhibits.

Open or Closed

Strategic or Tactical

Big Picture or Small Picture

Flexible or Inflexible

Good Client Relationships or Bad Client Relationships

Integral or a Necessary Evil

Each of the behaviors represented by these characteristics represents a success or risk factor for the IT group. Of course, more "negative" behaviors indicate greater risk.

For example, one organization I was involved with had the following characteristics:

Closed organization - the IT organization made decisions about IT solely unto itself.

Mostly tactical but some strategic. Ability to follow a strategy was greatly inhibited by fire fighting.

Most members of the IT team viewed KM as irrelevant due to the fact that basic needs were not being met (small picture).

IT was viewed as a necessary evil.

IT was leading the effort to create a culture of knowledge management.

Obviously, such an IT organization has significant risk in leading a knowledge management effort. Given the many risk factors, the possibility of success is extremely low. For this particular case, the organization should first resolve to work on its significant cultural problems, and then possibly entertain a knowledge management effort.

Even if the IT organization has a significant number of success factors, there is still the consideration of the surrounding organization.

In order for a knowledge management effort to succeed on an organizational level, support for the effort must come from the top levels of the management team. Although some degrees of success can be achieved within pockets of the organization, larger successes require more significant support for the effort. On the surface, it is hard to deny the benefits of a knowledge management effort, but under the covers t a KM effort is not always justifiable in terms of bottom line benefits. Since the introduction of a KM effort will necessarily involve behavioral changes, the precise bottom line benefits will take some time to manifest themselves. Therefore, the executive sponsor(s) must not only support the effort at its inception, but also continue to support it until such time as benefits are seen and the effort can become self-supporting.

In considering some of the cultural/behavioral characteristics of the surrounding organization, I would ask the following questions to determine if the organization was one that would support a KM effort.

1. Do the executives of the organization understand the goals and purpose of knowledge management?

2. If there are executive sponsor(s), are they willing to commit to the effort for the "long haul?"
3. What is the history of the executives with regard to potentially long-term commitments?
4. What is the view of the executives towards the IT organization?
5. Are the executives primarily driven by bottom line considerations?
6. Is the organization hierarchical?
7. Do the executives support mistake making?
8. Is the IT organization seen as a partner in success (strategic view) or as a cost center that fills a particular need (tactical)?

To a substantial degree the success of a KM effort whether or not carried out by the IT organization will be dependent on the management team of the organization. If the team supports a closed, hierarchical, power-based, short-term focused environment, then no KM effort will be successful, whether undertaken by IT or not. Likewise, if IT is viewed as a necessary evil by the management team and/or clients, and/or the IT organization is not seen as being particularly successful at providing IT services, then this can be considered another significant risk factor.

The answer to the question, "Should IT do KM?" depends on a consideration of the nature of both the IT organization and the surrounding (parent) organization. An assessment of cultural characteristics of each organization should be made and the cultural relationship of the IT organization and its parent should also be assessed. It is with this information that a proper answer to this question can be determined.

[Aside: do you want to mention anything about if NOT IT then who?]

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Next week's issue: Personal Knowledge Management

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<http://www.accsys-corp.com>.

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